



More True Stories: On the Dangers of War, Navy Wives, and the Absurd

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In my October column I recounted several adventures (and misadventures) of my little wooden minesweeper during our 10-month deployment off the coast of South Vietnam during 1966-67. This column shows the three diverse dimensions of war: the finger-nail-biting danger of what war sometimes entails, the fortitude of the Navy wife, and the absurd.

The Navy has the reputation of being very stingy in awarding medals, at least up to and including the Vietnam War. But my wooden ship and Iron Men did receive one for heroism while fighting and extinguishing a fire in the hold of a merchantman in Da Nang harbor in the summer of 1967. The reported cause was sabotage.

We were called off patrol to proceed ASAP to the scene and were warned that the cargo was rice. We arrived alongside the smoking ship and our damage-control and firefighting teams demonstrated that all those hours of drills pay off. After we fought the fire below decks in the merchantman, the report came that the fire was out. The master of the merchantman rewarded my Iron Men with cigarettes and other goodies, and we were soon underway again on patrol. We were warned about the cargo because rice dust is highly explosive and flammable. The fire never got to the rice holds. God smiled on us again.

Iron People Include Moms, Wives

All during my narrative of the USS Prime's adventures off the coast of South Vietnam during 1966-67, I've been referring to my crew as Iron Men. But there were other "Iron People" who kept this little wooden minesweeper and her crew afloat during those difficult months: the Navy wives and the Navy moms.

Navy wives have long been regarded by all who know them as being the most resourceful and long-suffering of any group of military wives -- in war, and especially in peace, when most all other military hubbies are home. The old story goes that after the Navy wife drops the man off at the ship and waves a tearful goodbye as the ship disappears over the horizon, during the drive home the car conks out. A few days after that the kids come down with the flu, and a few months after that, guess who's pregnant?

Our Navy wives suffered the unknown, cherished the long-awaited letter, endured all, and were there on the pier, beautiful and proud, welcoming their men home.

Today many in the Reserves and National Guard have been called up to serve, many on short notice, leaving wives and families and longtime careers behind.

Yes, today's military wives have instant e-mail, but their sufferings and hardships are as real as those of our wives and mothers 40 years ago.

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Again, a true story.

We were officially on our way home from our Vietnam deployment. But first we were to visit Hong Kong for five days as a reward for our many months on counter-infiltration patrols off the coast of South Vietnam. I would buy gifts for my lovely wife, my 2-year-old son, and an 8month-old daughter whom I had never seen.

In order that a minesweeper would not be blown into a thousand toothpicks in an enemy minefield after suffering a major engine casualty, its propellers would automatically go to full reverse so that the minesweeper would back out of the minefield over the same path it already swept.

As I was conning the ship to our assigned berth across the entrance to Victoria Basin, the current flowing into Victoria Basin caught the ship and drew us crossways into the Basin. The only problem was we would not fit crossways so I had to resort to emergency full backing orders, which put undue stress on the engines and resulted in a major engine casualty. The propellers went to full reverse.

At this point I commenced one of the most memorable cruises of my life. For 20 minutes I proceeded to sail through the busy port of Hong Kong, backward, dodging and avoiding the multitude of small ferries, sampans, and junks in the harbor. The Chinese crews were waving their arms at me madly. I do not know how to speak Chinese but I do understand certain gestures. I heard over the harbor radio circuit in a stiff British accent, "Captain of the USS Prime, what are your intentions, OVAH?" I

grabbed the mike and said through clenched teeth, "I've had a major engineering casualty and am experiencing difficulties." I almost said, "My apologies to the Queen," but I kept my Irish cool. We had successfully evaded all the harbor small craft but now were bearing down onto the flagship of Commander, Seventh Fleet the cruiser, USS Boston, peacefully at anchor, except for the deckhands who were scurrying to get out of the path of our impending point of impact.

But then I noticed that we seemed to be slowing. The engineers soon reported that they had successfully "dumped the clutches" and within minutes we were "Dead in the Water," and I couldn't help thinking, so was my naval career.

'How Do You Sleep at Night?'

Later, alone in the wardroom, as I was awaiting the wrath of Commander, Seventh Fleet and the entire British Royal Navy, one of my young officers came in and said to me, "Captain, how do you handle the stress of this job? During the past 10 months we had a man knocked overboard, a major fire, almost went on the rocks after losing an anchor, boarded many suspicious junks in filthy weather, had a major typhoon in the Formosa Straits. How do you sleep at night?"

I replied, "Son, I sleep just like a baby, yes, just like a baby: I wake up every two hours and cry."

God smiled on my little wooden ship's fortunes again. But after this fiasco in Hong Kong harbor, I think He probably also had a good laugh.

A retired captain in the U.S. Navy and a vietnam veteran, Connie O'Neill served as the Virginia state adjutant of the American Legion from 1988 to 2001. O'Neill chaired the Board of Veterans Affairs in the Allen administration and was appointed to the Joint Leadership Council, comprising 21 veterans' organizations and 200,000 veterans, by Governor Mark Warner; in 2004 the group elected him its chairman. His Commentary Columns regarding veterans' issues appear regularly on the Back Fence.

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